

# Utopia and Design of Society

*Utopia and Design of Society Workshop at NORDES 2015, Stockholm, 9.6.2015. This intensive full day workshop will engage its participants in a two stage process of 1) discussion of societal designs and 2) an exploration of using utopia as a method for discussing desirable futures. Organizers: Kari-Hans Kommonen, Mia Muurimäki and Régis Frias / Arki research group / Aalto ARTS Media Lab. The workshop is a part of the Redesign of Society initiative.*

## Introduction

Our world is in a severe state. Climate change, growing inequality, financial crises, unemployment, destruction of biodiversity and habitats, and depletion of natural resources are examples of the greatest challenges we are facing, and there are practically no commonly shared visions that could guide our societies towards global, sustainable long term solutions.

We believe that design, as an inherently transdisciplinary and integrative practice and activity, could make significant contributions to this (Kommonen 2001). However, this requires that the design field and those involved must develop new competences and understandings of fields that they may not have thought about as relevant for design, and that we can find and develop relevant communities of both experts and citizens that welcome the contributions from our direction.

The aim of this workshop is to take steps in that direction. The workshop invites a group of participants who are interested in exploring a design-oriented way to create ideas of serious utopias – i.e. what kind of a society we would like to have in the future.

## Theme of workshop

The theme of the workshop is "Utopia and design of society", and it is divided into two stages.

## Morning: Discussing and analyzing societal designs

We propose that useful design discussions can be initiated if we are able to broaden the understanding and discussion of what designs are, and what are designs.

Several key authors in the field of design have highlighted how design is a universal human activity and how everyday life and society are permeated with design (e.g. Cross 2006; Krippendorff 2006; Nelson & Stolterman 2012; Papanek 1971). However, most of these tend to discuss the topic from the point of view of the designer or the design activity, which leaves the point of view of society and of citizens, as well as the kinds of design processes that are not designer-led but perhaps more of emergent nature, less elaborated.

With *societal designs* we refer to designs and design features such as institutions, laws, customs, practices, social systems, concepts, ideologies, beliefs, structures, functions, and so on (Kommonen 2013; Schneider & Ingram 1997; Ostrom 2005; Benkler 2006; Wright 2010; Unger 1996; Lessig 2006).

## How to participate?

### Registration

For registering to the workshop, there is a Doodle address where you can sign up which will be provided to you by the conference organizers when you have successfully registered for the conference. Please note that there is a limit of 20 participants, and participants will be accepted in the order they register up until 20 registrations have been received. If this Doodle is already full, you are welcome to send us an email (see address below) if you are interested in a place in the case of a cancellation.

### Position paper

We ask all participants to prepare a position paper with input for the workshop with

1. a short **introduction** of themselves,
2. an **example of a change** that is or should be taking place in society, and
3. a **design fiction story** about society in the year 2040.

These are explained more in detail below. As these will be used as materials in the workshop, we hope that you would send them to [mia.muurimaki@aalto.fi](mailto:mia.muurimaki@aalto.fi) as soon as possible after your registration, to help us to prepare for the workshop activities well in advance!

We will have an internal website that is open only for the participants, and parts 1-2 of your input will be posted there and made available for other participants a few days before the workshop. Part 3 will be shared during the workshop. As these materials are targeted mainly for facilitating the groupwork, we will not share these materials publicly. As this is a highly experimental workshop, we do not plan publishable results. However, we expect that the workshop may lead to some future publishable collaborations.

The workshop will rely a lot on the material you contribute beforehand, but at the same time we suggest that interested participants would not be overly ambitious or self-critical in preparing their contribution: we don't want you to drop participation because you think preparing the input is too hard. Hence we welcome as input any contributions that attempt to respond to our questions!

### 1. Introduction

Please write a short introduction that includes

- your name
- your email
- your affiliation and other possibly relevant background information

## Questions, inquiries?

Please send any questions for more information to [mia.muurimaki@aalto.fi](mailto:mia.muurimaki@aalto.fi).

## Designs in society

Here is a non-exhaustive list of things that we believe can be usefully thought about as *having a design*.

- institutions, organizations, bureaucracies,
- rules, laws, regulations, agreements,
- practices, routines, habits, customs, rituals, cultural institutions,
- beliefs, belief systems, ideologies,
- systems, platforms, processes,
- language, discourses, expert vocabularies, concepts,
- plans, policies, strategies, campaigns, principles,
- artifacts, music, artworks, narratives, brands,
- organisms, organs, biological systems,
- businesses, value chains, markets,...

## Examples of concerns

If you have trouble finding a topic to consider changes in society, we have collected a page of [Concerns and challenges for society](#) for your inspiration!

## Sources for inspiration

Please find below a selection of links to materials that may be of inspiration.

UPDATE: [We have some quotes for you on this page](#) that may provide some inspiration.

## Design

- Papanek, V.J., 1971. *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change.*, London: Thames and Hudson.
- Schneider, A.L. & Ingram, H., 1997. *Policy Design for Democracy*, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press.
- Krippendorff, K., 2006. *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design*, Boca Raton: CRC/Taylor & Francis.
- Kommonen, K.-H., 2001. Design for Society in Transformation. *Special Issue of Japanese Society for the Science of Design*, 9(3), pp.83–88. (pdf)
- Kommonen, K.-H., 2013. Design Ecosystems as the Landscapes for Co-Creation. In *Proceedings of the*

We invite the participants to explore ways how the design of society can be discussed in a useful way, through the examples they bring to the workshop. In the morning session we will discuss the designs brought to the workshop and try to analyze them, and conclude by reflecting on what we can learn about society through this kind of an analytical lens.

## Afternoon: Utopia 2040

In the afternoon session, we will move on to develop together ideas of a desirable future society in the year 2040, based on ideas of participants, and try to employ design language in our work, maybe also potentially mobilizing some of the designs we have discussed earlier as building blocks for the utopias.

The term *utopia* comes from Thomas More's book of the same name (More 1516), and has turned into a generic label for depictions of alternative societal models. Ruth Levitas proposes that utopia can be used as a method, as it:

*"facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, provisionality and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures. And it requires us to think about our conceptions of human needs and human flourishing in those possible futures. The core of utopia is the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively. Its expressions explore and bring to debate the potential contents and contexts of human flourishing. It is thus better understood as a method than a goal."* (Levitas 2013)

## Conclusions

In the concluding stage, we will discuss the key findings of the exercise, eg. 1) the difficulties and benefits of the utopian thinking and our ability to approach and envision a description of a desirable society; 2) the feasibility and usefulness of design analysis and utopia as methods in such a limited exercise and 3) how these experiences can help us to foresee their value in some larger context? Will some of the work done in this workshop form interesting *building blocks* for future utopia and design fiction work? And, finally, what did we learn about design in society and societal design?

## References

Benkler, Y., 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press.

Cross, N., 2006. *Designerly Ways of Knowing* 2006 edition., Cambridge: Springer.

Kommonen, K.-H., 2013. Design Ecosystems as the Landscapes for Co-Creation. In *Proceedings of the CO-CREATE 2013*. Espoo, Finland: Aalto University, p. 728.

- any notes about why you are interested in the topics of the workshop

This introduction will be shared with all participants on the website and in the workshop.

## 2. Change in society

In the workshop, we want to discuss the design of society and how the design is or should be changing. As material for our discussions, we hope that participants bring **examples of changes in society** that they think are happening, have happened or should be happening, and try to identify designs, design actors and design processes that are relevant to the example.

In your contribution, please present

- an **example of a need for change in society**, small or large (hint for inspiration: newspapers! or materials on this page in the left hand column...)
- supported by notes about **what kinds of societal designs are involved**, e.g. (you can also take a different approach in your notes)
  - which **designs are changing** and which ones **play some role** and should be **understood** and **taken into account**
  - **who are the designers** that a) can or should **make** the new design and b) **decide** whether it will happen or not
  - what are the various **forces driving or opposing** the change

This description will be shared with all participants on the website and in the workshop.

## 3. Story from Utopia 2040

In the afternoon, we will explore how we can use Design Fiction and Utopia as methods to develop interesting ideas about the future for society, combined with the design language we have been exercising in the morning. To feed the work, we ask all participants to **write a design fiction story** to feed the afternoon work.

In your contribution, please

- write a **short news story for a newspaper** that will appear on June 9th, 2040
- tell about something that let's us **imagine how society and everyday life has changed** in 25 years
- your story can be either **utopian or dystopian** - i.e. something you consider **desirable or undesirable**; the point is to inspire you and other participants to **think fruitfully about a future** that is different from today
- we will compile the stories into a newspaper that will be distributed in the workshop, to feed the utopia session

*CO-CREATE 2013*. Espoo, Finland: Aalto University, p. 728. (pdf)

- Benkler, Y., 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Cross, N., 2006. *Designerly Ways of Knowing* 2006 edition., Cambridge: Springer.
- Ostrom, E., 2005. *Understanding Institutional Diversity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Unger, R.M., 1996. *What Should Legal Analysis Become?*, London; New York: Verso Books.

## Utopia

- Ruth Levitas - <http://dbms.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/spais/people/person/ruth-a-levitas/>
  - Levitas, R. (2006). *The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: or why sociologists and others should take Utopia more seriously.* (pdf)
  - Levitas, R. (2013). *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. Houndmills: New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Erik Olin Wright - <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/>
  - *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010)
- *Marxist.org Utopian Socialism pages* - discussion of many facets of utopia with full texts from e.g. Plato, Thomas More, Samuel Butler, Edward Bellamy, H.G. Wells etc
- Roberto Mangabeira Unger
  - Unger, R. M. (1996). *What Should Legal Analysis Become?*. London; New York: Verso Books. ([intro pages](#))

## Design fiction

- Arki research group / Aalto ARTS Media Lab
  - Kommonen, K.-H. (1998). *Future media home: design fiction tells more than a thousand facts.* *Arttu*, (5), 41.
  - Future Media Home / *Design Fiction project* (1998)
  - *Asumisen arki ja unelmat (At home today, tomorrow)* (2000)
  - *Uman Bing* (2000)
- Julian Bleecker (2009). *Design Fiction: A Short Essay on Design, Science, Fact and Fiction* Near Future Laboratory
- Bruce Sterling (2009). COVER STORY: Design Fiction. *Interactions*, 16(3), 20–24. (pdf)
- Wakkary, R., Desjardins, A., Hauser, S., & Maestri, L. (2008). A Sustainable Design Fiction: Green Practices. *ACM Trans. Comput.-Hum. Interact.*, 20(4), 23:1–23:34. (pdf)

Kommonen, K.-H., 2001. Design for Society in Transformation. *Special Issue of Japanese Society for the Science of Design*, 9(3), pp.83–88.

Krippendorff, K., 2006. *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design*, Boca Raton: CRC /Taylor & Francis.

Lessig, L., 2006. *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace, Version 2.0*, New York: Basic Books.

Levitas, R., 2013. *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Houndmills: New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

More, T., 1516. *Utopia*

Nelson, H.G. & Stolterman, E., 2012. *The Design Way: Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World*, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press.

Ostrom, E., 2005. *Understanding Institutional Diversity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Papanek, V.J., 1971. *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change.*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Schneider, A.L. & Ingram, H., 1997. *Policy Design for Democracy*, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press.

Unger, R.M., 1996. *What Should Legal Analysis Become?*, London; New York: Verso Books.

Wright, E.O., 2010. *Envisioning real utopias*, London; New York: Verso.

This story will not be shared before the workshop, but it will be shared in the workshop before lunch break. *Please note that in order to prepare the newspaper, we need to receive your story well in advance of the workshop!*

Please write these 3 parts clearly separated from each other, into a text document or a plain email message and send them to [mia.muurimaki@aalto.fi](mailto:muurimaki@aalto.fi).